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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the impact of school reform and restructuring programs on African-American students with exceptionalities and suggests strategies for general and special educators, policymakers, and administrators. It reviews the history of school reforms and concludes that the America 2000/Goals 2000 program and the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act both fail to address the needs of African-American and other at-risk students because of their heavy reliance on tests. Teacher education programs are also criticized for their heavy reliance on tests for admission and program completion as well as on their "soullessness" and "poverty of the teaching spirit." Most reform efforts are seen to address "quality" but not "equity" and thus cause more problems than they solve. Recommendations for responsible reform and restructuring programs for African-American exceptional learners include: (1) ensuring that adequate cultural knowledge is included in professional standards; (2) recruiting and retaining African-American general and special educators at all levels; (3) focusing on problem solutions and not problem politics; (4) addressing issues of equity and excellence; and (5) creating a Comprehensive Support Model to involve students, parents, schools, and communities. (Contains 19 references.) (DB)

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# Restructuring and Reforming: "Rat Race" for Excellence or Failure?

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**Abstract**

Recent reform and restructuring programs in education have emphasized excellence and quality. Presumably, these programs are instituted to change the "Nation at Risk" to the "Nation of Students." Though these programs appear visionary, their fundamental ingredients highlight "old" ideas based on a "puritanic" perfect society. Little attention is usually focused on equity in testing, placement and instructional policies. For African-American and other culturally and linguistically different students with exceptionalities, present reform and restructuring programs may create more problems than they can solve unless common sense approaches are incorporated. This paper discusses the impact of reform and restructuring programs on African-American students with exceptionalities. Embedded in this discussion are strategies for general and special educators, policy makers and administrators.

**Restructuring and Reforming: "Rat Race" for Excellence or Failure?**

Change appears to be an inevitable consequence. Some changes are progressive, some are retrogressive, and some produce "mixed baggages." These confusing baggages frequently lead to tremendous debates among educators. Many years ago, the Russians launched Sputnik and the United States responded by re-orientating its educational programs. Committees were formed to restructure and reform the system, educators and community leaders were involved, and targeted programs were instituted. Today, the society faces a greater challenge, i.e., how to help each person (irrespective of race, color, gender, and linguistic difference) to maximize his/her potential. Put another way, the challenge for educational reformers is how to respond to "quality" and "equity" in terms of individual and collective growth (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1987; Ford & Obiakor, 1995; Goodlad & Lovitt, 1993; Obiakor, Algozzine & Ford, 1993, 1994; Samuelson & Obiakor, 1995; Trent, 1992).

Embedded in issues of quality and equity are inclusion, multiculturalism, collaboration, consultation, cooperation, partnership, teamwork and empowerment. In this decade, these issues have become driving forces for change and reform. Cuban (1990) decried the repetitive nature of reforms and how educational programs have fallen prey to them. In the same dimension, Kauffman and Hallahan (1995), Ford and Obiakor (1995), and Trent (1992) decried the lack of common-sense approaches to the "rat race" for educational reforms. It is apparent that most educators welcome reform and restructuring programs; but it is also apparent that they are skeptical about their applicability. In this paper, the authors discuss the impact of reform and restructuring programs on African-American students with exceptionalities. Incorporated in this discussion are strategies for general and special educators, policy makers and administrators.

**Reforms and the Band-Aid Phenomena**

As indicated, change appears to be an inevitable consequence. The question that educational reformers struggle with is, Can real progress be made in education without destroying the entrenched culture? This question seems to be an enigma. It is common knowledge that a myriad of legislative mandates to reform and restructure educational practices has been promulgated for all students' benefits. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1973 Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, the 1975 Education of All Handicapped Children Act, the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the 1994 Goals 2000 Educate America Act have been frantic governmental efforts to assist all students in maximizing their full potential. Ironically, for African-American and other culturally and linguistically different students, these legislative efforts appear to have "scotched the snake but not killed it." Even though they have promoted non-discriminatory educational services and practices, the present state of affairs reveals that African-American learners are still confronted with multidimensional problems. Artiles and Trent (1994), and Ford and Obiakor (1995) reiterated that African-American youth and other culturally diverse learners remain disproportionately represented in special education programs for students with cognitive and/or behavioral difficulties while having limited access to services for learners with gifts and talents. In addition, many administrators, educators, and service providers who design and implement services for African-American youth appear unprepared or ill prepared to provide these services for this population.

The 1954 *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* case created optimistic feelings that systemic exclusion and inequitable separate educational policies and programs will never be

"legally" condoned. However, we still see what Jonathan Kozol (1992) called "savage inequalities" in programmatic funding for some segments of the society. Presently, the burning educational issue is inclusion. Many educators are wondering if this is "an old wine in a new bottle or a new wine in a old bottle." Will inclusion maintain the traditional status quo of inequity for African-American learners and their families and communities? It is important to acknowledge that some educational progress has been made. It is also important that educators and policy makers do not ignore or deny the racial and political "game-playing" that continues to permeate the referral, assessment, identification, categorization, placement, and teaching of African-American learners. These games are destructive to African-American learners--and to society at large.

**Visionary Reforms Versus Illusionary Results**

Traditionally, reform and restructuring programs are designed to reach all students. The critical question is, What kind of reform and restructuring program will best meet the needs of African-American learners with exceptionalities? Laws have been promulgated; court battles have been fought; yet "the more things change the more they remain the same." To positively impact the advancement of African-American learners, educational reform and change must be meaningful and goal-oriented. The "rat-race" for reforms may not be the answer--some reforms lack the vision and common sense. For instance, the U.S. Department of Education (1991), in its book, America 2000: An education strategy mapped out six national education goals "to jump start a new generation of American schools, transforming a 'Nation at Risk' into a 'Nation of Students'" (p. 59). According to the U.S. Department of Education under the auspices of former President George Bush, by the beginning of the 21st century:

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
4. U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
5. Every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
6. Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer disciplined environment conducive to learning. (p. 3)

The "America 2000" program was expanded by President Bill Clinton when he signed The "Goals 2000" Educate America Act (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Apparently, this law incorporated many major ingredients of the "America 2000" program. With all its good intentions, the "America 2000" program was unrealistic because it (a) relied heavily on national testing, (b) irrationally advocated parental choice, and (c) ill-defined accountability to suit "smart" students, "good" schools, and students from "good" socio-economic backgrounds. At present, the 104th Congress is controlled by the Conservative Republican Party--based on the "Contract for America"- signed by this majority body, there appears to be (a) budgetary constraints for "poverty" programs, (b) major foci on testing, parental choice and accountability at all educational levels, and (c) serious attacks on compensatory education programs. Today, many inner-city schools are ear-marked as "poor" while schools in the suburbs are labeled as "rich" schools. There appears to be illusionary correlations between poverty and "poor" intelligence, "poor" self-concept, and "poor" ability to succeed in school. The question is, How prepared are these "rich" schools to respond to the dreaded issue of

cultural diversity of African-American parents and students? Not long ago, Kaplan (1991) reacted:

> As an educational strategy, America 2000 is a plan for middle class America, where pride in academic achievement still runs high most of the time and most people like their community's schools. That some of these schools are performing below expectation is lamentable, but jettisoning them in order to conform to a market-driven, private school-oriented vision of schooling in a responsible democratic society is palpable nonsense, and very dangerous. (p. 36)

It appears that the institution of the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act reilluminated many fundamental concepts of special education. The public was reassured of (a) adequate identification, (b) nondiscriminatory multidisciplinary assessment, (c) placement in the least restrictive environment, (d) confidentiality of information, (e) parental consent, (f) procedural safeguards, and (g) individualized educational programming. The general consensus was that old mistakes would never be repeated. About five years later, the old debates continue to rage. The troublesome question continues to be, Can present reform programs that rely heavily on tests address the needs of African-American and other at-risk youngsters who frequently fall between the cracks?

To further expose illusionary results of reform programs, the "soullessness" of teacher preparation programs and the "poverty of the teaching spirit" are discussed. As always, teacher preparation and instructional strategies are major embodiments of most reform and restructuring movements.

The "Soullessness" of Teacher Preparation Programs

In this day and age, the reality of multiculturalism is apparent. Mendenhall (1991) indicated that "the more everyone in a group knows and understands the same set of social values, the less interpersonal problems will result between group members" (p. D7). While

acknowledging that multiculturalism will foster harmonious relationships, he noted that "in many parts of the United States it is a reality -- and it is predicted that by the year 2010 it will be reality for the entire American work place" (p.D7). The question is, How prepared are America's teacher education programs to respond to these challenges? Price (1991) argued that "the blame for balkanization rests more with those who have the power to include but won't and less with those on the outside who are barred entry" (p.8). Put another way, teacher education programs have important roles to play to enhance the workability of reform programs.

Most teacher education programs have consistently relied on scores made in the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the American College Test (ACT), and the Pre-Professional Skills Test (PPST) for admission. In addition, before graduation, most States require students to have passing scores in the National Teacher Examination (NTE) for a gainful employment. These requirements create tremendous problems for many African-American and other culturally and linguistically diverse student-teachers. Many of these students get frustrated and drop out of teacher education programs -- this leads to an apparent lack of minority teachers in special education programs that traditionally have many minority students. For instance, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) (1987) reported that the number of African-Americans in teacher education is small when compared to the number of African-American group children in public schools--African Americans represent about 16.2% of the children in public schools, but only about 6.2% of the teachers.

The "Poverty of the Teaching Spirit"

When African-American and other minority students are taught by teachers who do not understand their cultures, symbols or values, the whole concept of individualized

educational programming fails. To respond to individual differences, textbooks and methods have to be revisited. Thomas and Alawiye (1990) decried the non-representation of achievements of African-American members of the society in the literature. They wrote:

> Our examination of selected elementary textbooks, grades 1 to 6 disclosed that the historical background and cultural contributions of slaves in early America are ignored. In particular, the art, architecture, literature, and music contributed by West Africans during their enslavement in the American South are excluded. (p.20)

The implication of Thomas and Alawiye's statement is that many supposed reform instructional programs have failed to value (a) historical backgrounds of African-American students, (b) language and symbols that African-American students bring to class, (c) behavioral patterns of African-American students, (d) cultural beliefs of African-American students, and (e) events which have molded African-American group members (Banks, 1991; Gay, 1981). The complex web of informal Eurocentric rules and processes tend to decrease academic opportunities, choices and achievements for African-American exceptional learners. These students are sometimes made to feel that they cannot compete and excel in different educational programs.

Based on the above discussion, it is reasonable to argue that the "quality" without "equity" mentality in educational reform programs creates more problems than it solves. Most reform programs have been weak in their inability to address the issue of equity in teacher training and pedagogy. Rather than encourage real inclusion, they appear to be illusionary programs that have little regard for the changing demography in America's 21st century classroom.

## Perspectives for the 21st Century

As we advance into the 21st century, we must create genuine school/parent/community

partnerships. Schools and professionals can make a difference, but they must be equipped and prepared with the necessary tools and knowledge. The present delivery systems must be reworked, and reform and restructuring movements must be thoughtfully followed. Educators must continue to ask "Why," "How," "When," "Where," and "What" if they are serious about responding to the needs of atypical students. Current reform programs may benefit African-American exceptional learners, however, they must be explored in details. An irresponsible "rat-race" for reforms can lead to failures. Responsible reform and restructuring programs for African-American exceptional learners are those that:

1. Ensure that adequate cultural knowledge is included in professional standards.
2. Provide strategies for recruiting and retaining African-American general and special educators and service providers from early childhood through university levels.
3. Focus on the solution to the problem and not on the politics of the problem confronting students.
4. Address issues of equity and excellence in the education of all students.
5. Provide opportunities for creating a Comprehensive Support Model (CSM) to empower all students, all parents, all schools, and all communities. Remember, it takes a whole village to raise a child.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the impact of reform and restructuring programs on African-American and other culturally and linguistically diverse students with exceptionalities. We support "change;" but we must be careful in accepting change. Artiles and Trent (1994) warned that policy makers and policy implementers must examine problems in their complexity and test solutions to avoid historical mistakes of the past. Based on this premise, we concur that general and special educators must prepare for shifts in power and paradigm.

Clearly, for educators to anticipate the future, they must start very early to search for "new" meaning.

Reform and restructuring programs call for dialogue, collaboration, consultation, cooperation and partnership. Responsible reform programs must be strategically visionary and not illusionary -- they must selflessly help all students, all parents, all schools, and all communities to maximize their growth potential. When properly examined, reform and restructuring programs for African-American exceptional learners will lead to responsible "rat-race" for excellence in education.

It is common knowledge that no reform program can answer all educational problems of African-American students. The answer lies within the realistic intent of educational programs to attack inequities through practical implementation of multiculturalism and multiethnicity in assessment, placement and instructional policies. There is an absolute need for more "soul" in teacher preparation programs to avoid the "poverty of the teaching spirit." Challenges that face our reform programs today reflect challenges that will face our public schools in the 21st century. These challenges will continue as long as our educational programs are not required to respond to the needs of all segments of our changing society.

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